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Abstract

By the end of the century the number of non-whites in Canada is conservatively estimated to be one quarter of the population, thus 'radically altering the world's image of a Canadian as white-skinned and of British or French heritage.'1 Bruce Proudfoot in an article on 'The Setting of Immigration Levels in Canada Since the Immigration Act, 1976', remarks that 'Concern has been expressed by many regarding the future make-up of the Canadian population in the context of the arrival and settlement of immigrants from non-traditional sources - sometimes categorised under the term Visible Minorities'.2

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By the end of the century the number of non-whites in Canada is conservatively estimated to be one quarter of the population, thus 'radically altering the world's image of a Canadian as white-skinned and of British or French heritage.'[1] Bruce Proudfoot in an article on 'The Setting of Immigration Levels in Canada Since the Immigration Act, 1976', remarks that 'Concern has been expressed by many regarding the future make-up of the Canadian population in the context of the arrival and settlement of immigrants from non-traditional sources – sometimes categorised under the term Visible Minorities'.[2]

The impact of this 'concern' on the Visible Minorities themselves has been treated by many Canadian women writers. For example, the heroine of the Trinidad-born Dionne Brand's story 'Train to Montreal' is followed by a stranger hoarsely yelling '"Nigger whore!"'[3] One of the Chinese-Canadian women in Sky Lee's novel *Disappearing Moon Cafe* ponders the significance of 'the great wall of silence and invisibility we have built around us'.[4]

Bharati Mukherjee in the introduction to her short story collection *Darkness* speaks of her transformation as a writer when she moved to the United States from Canada in 1980 and changed from a 'visible minority' into just another immigrant: 'If I may put it in its harshest terms, it would be this: in Canada, I was frequently taken for a prostitute or shoplifter, frequently assumed to be a domestic, praised by astonished auditors that I didn't have a "sing-song" accent.'[5] Frequent attention has been drawn to the significance of the difference between the U.S. metaphor 'melting pot' and the Canadian 'mosaic', for example in the collection of essays *Westerners Through Chinese Eyes*,[6] and in the title of the second chapter of Linda Hutcheon's critical study *Splitting Images*: '"The Canadian Mosaic: A Melting Pot on Ice": The Ironies of Ethnicity and Race'.[7] In Canada, all immigrants remain highly visible, or so at least some Canadian fiction would suggest. The expatriate writer Mavis Gallant, in her short story 'Its Image on the Mirror', gives a devastating account of Jean Price's father (described by one critic as a 'mild but enthusiastic' racist)[8]:

> Our father believed that Scottish blood was the best in the country, responsible for our national character traits of prudence, level-headedness, and self-denial. If anyone doubted it, our father said, the doubter had only to look at the rest of Canada: the French-Canadians (political corruption, pusillanimity, hysteria); the Italians (hair oil, used to bootleg in the 'twenties, used to pass right through Allenton); Russians and Ukrainians (regicide, Communism, pyromania, the distressing cult of nakedness on the West Coast) ; Jews (get in everywhere, the women don't wear corsets) ; Swedes, Finns, (awful people for a bottle, never save a cent) ; Poles, hunkies, the whole Danubian fringe (they start all the wars). The Irish were Catholics, and the Germans had been beyond the pale since 1914. The only immigrant group he approved of were the Dutch. A census had revealed that although there were a quarter-million of them in the country, they were keeping quietly to themselves on celery farms in Western Ontario, saving money, not setting fire to anything, well-corseted, and out of politics. Their virtue, in fact, was that until the census one needn't have known they existed.[9]

The Pakistan-born executive director of the Canadian Ethno-Cultural Council asked angrily in 1989, 'What is Canada? The only people here who aren't immigrants are the aboriginal people.'[10] But Native Canadians have not been treated well either. In her preface to her autobiography *Bobbi Lee, Indian Rebel*, first published in 1975, Lee Maracle writes, 'This summer [of 1990], if anything, the state convinced a good many Canadian white people that it does not give a shit about any of us.'[11]

In 1990 Lee Maracle also published a collection of short stories, *Sojourner's Truth*, which depict the oppression of Native Canadians, and in which she has used Native Canadian oral tradition, she says, to produce narratives without orthodox 'conclusions'.[12]

In a similar way Claire Harris subverts the conventional narrative with which her story 'A Matter of Fact' opens, by continuing:

> Of all this: the river valley, the girl Jocelyn, the pregnancy, Burri as snake, the old storyteller will say nothing. She has no truck with this simple form, with its order and its inherent possibility of justice.[13]

Ironically, though, the narrator interpolates later, with a joint appeal to oral tradition and the literary tradition of the 'majority', 'I remember the old woman. And I am sure the story was told as I have written it because that is how the books say Afro-Caribbean tales are told. Your books, I mean' (pp. 109-110).

Lee Maracle's and Claire Harris's narrative strategies actually have much in common with those of Alice Munro, neither a Native Canadian nor a 'visible minority'. Hallvard Dahlie, for example, has commented on the way Munro's stories leave us with a residual uncertainty, puzzlement, or even despair.[14] Rosalie Osmond has written on Munro's balancing of different kinds of narrative in her essay 'Arrangements, "Disarrangements", and "Earnest Deceptions"'.[15] Coral Ann Howells argues that contemporary Canadian women's fiction as a whole focuses on what Munro herself has

described (in a story) as those shifts of emphasis that throw the storyline open to question, the disarrangements which demand new judgments and solutions, and throw the windows open on inappropriate, unforgettable scenery.[16] The metaphor of scenery here is highly characteristic, for Munro's whole perception of her characters' lives is through emotional landscape. The blurb for *Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You* accurately describes her stories as opening up 'a whole geography of pain'; in a typical image Munro speaks, in the final sentence of her first volume, of the piano piece chosen by an eccentric old music teacher as 'that one communiqué from the other country where she lives'.[17] In all of Munro's stories we are conscious not only of the physical landscape, with its shifting implications ('country we did not know we loved', as she calls it in *Lives of Girls and Women*)[18] but of a dangerous landscape lying beneath and beyond it, whether it is the ironically named 'Mary Fortune's territory' of the lonely and despised ('Red Dress – 1946', p. 160), or the fatal legendary region of real life that Et recognizes in *Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You*.[19]

In 'Oranges and Apples' from Munro's latest volume, *Friend of My Youth*, Murray and Barbara live 'now' at the close of the story on rough, hilly land: 'Murray's father bought two hundred acres of it and built a primitive cabin and called the place his hunting camp.'[20] This last detail suggests that Murray's father had a romantic notion of himself as pioneer, possibly inspired by Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, a novel mentioned in the closing words of the story. Murray and Barbara find 'a white balloon, looking somewhat weakened and puckered' (p. 135). On one level this suggests an abandoned contraceptive, and thus, the end of the real or imagined sexual encounter between Barbara and Victor, but the balloon has blown over from the United States (like Fenimore Cooper), footnoted by a schoolboy, who names *The Last of the Mohicans* as his favourite book. The story ends: '"Oh, that's for the teacher," Barbara says, with the familiar little snort of laughter in her voice, dismissing and promising. "That's a lie"' (p. 136). The triple complexity of this statement – is it a fiction about a fiction about a fiction? – is a fittingly inconclusive conclusion to a story named after a game 'There was no way to win' (p. 123). Oranges and Apples is a game of choices, and the choice implicitly offered to Murray, but never explicitly stated, is 'Would you rather your wife left you for another man or died of cancer?' As it turns out, the choice, like all the choices of the game, is hypothetical.

The other man is Victor, a Polish immigrant, and to this white male European Munro attaches all the sterotypes of the 'visible minority'. He is a sexual predator, first appearing 'like a cat among the pigeons' as he scatters the maiden ladies at the store (p. 114). He is inescapably visible, six foot five (but imagined as tall as seven foot) (p. 115), and like 'a golden palomino' (p. 114). He is a troublemaker, confirming Mavis Gallant's character's prejudice that Poles 'start all the wars' by almost destroying his

friends' happy marriage. Watching Barbara sunbathing through his binoculars he looks as if he is wearing a gas mask (p. 126). His name implies that he wins wars, and by his own account he was, during the second world war, a war hero, but much about Munro's narrative is deliberately misleading. For example, as Barbara and Murray drive to the doctor's to find out whether she has cancer (all the imagery suggests that she has), the cornstalks are high and 'Any day now the farmers will start to cut them' (p. 113). Barbara wears a 'fall' wrap of 'wheat-colored' wool (p. 134). But Barbara does not have cancer, and, although, as Lee Maracle says of her own work, 'As listener/reader, you become the trickster',[21] and must make your own decisions, it seems that she did not go to bed with Victor either. After all, anyone who becomes Barbara's friend has to understand that 'Barbara doesn't want to *do* anything' (p. 111). The first thing we hear about her, punningly, is that she is a '"looker"' (p. 106).

Barbara is a voracious reader, in a way which Murray's mother almost makes seem sexually promiscuous. 'His mother said – isn't she worried about bringing all those books from the library into the house? You never know who has been handling them' (p. 112). Literary allusions within 'Oranges and Apples' spell social disaster (pp. 118-119, p. 121), but Victor, like all immigrants, presents himself as a story which must be read by the established settlers: 'Victor had a history of his own, of course' (p. 116). Whereas Murray, who has lost the status his great-grandfather won, says that his is a common story. Does it deserve to becalled a classic? (p. 109), Victor has a very flamboyant story – which Barbara does not believe (p. 117). Nor does she believe Victor's claim that his English wife Beatrice (who remains a completely enigmatic character) is trying to poison him (p. 125). In trying to establish this claim, Victor appeals to the strength of racial stereotype, saying to Murray, '"You think she would not poison, she is an English lady"' (p. 124).

Appearances are deceptive, Victor argues, whereas Barbara disbelieves his war stories precisely because his appearance is too conspicuous: '...You have to look more like Alec Guinness to get sent on a secret mission' (p. 117). Barbara means, presumably, that you have to have the anonymous face of the really great actor, but also that you have to fit the popularly accepted media image. She herself dresses in the style of currently popular film stars (p.120). Victor has the wrong image, both inside and outside the story, outside because an immigrant in a story by a contemporary Canadian woman writer is not expected to be a tall blond European male, nor slippery and dangerous, nor disloyal: after expressing his gratitude to the English Canadians who have helped him, Victor says he now has enough money to go to Montreal, where he will enjoy speaking French (p. 135). (Of course, he may be lying.)

Munro has said of herself, 'I guess that maybe as a writer I'm kind of an anachronism ... because I write about places where your roots are and most people don't live that kind of life any more at all.'[22] She does not,

however, present Barbara and Murray, who live where their roots are, as the true and open established settlers as opposed to Beatrice and Victor, the false and mysterious immigrants. Barbara, besides her addiction to fictions, has a secretive mouth, hair like veiling (p. 112), and such inexpressive behaviour that Murray cannot tell whether or not she has just heard she is fatally ill (p. 134). Murray, who played at bombing Germany during the war (p. 117), now plays at a kind of pathfinding like Natty Bumppo – for tourists who pretend to live in the wild (pp. 108-109). These European and American fantasies are put into perspective by the riven boulder which becomes part of Murray's emotional landscape as he waits for Barbara.[23] It is 'rock formed before the Last Ice Age' (p. 134). What is Canada? Who owns the land?

In the same vein, the closing sentence of Margaret Atwood's 'Wilderness Tips', the lead story of her latest volume, reads: 'And nothing has happened, really, that hasn't happened before.'[24] Portia is thinking despairingly of the fact that her husband, the Hungarian immigrant 'George', has just bedded her sister Pamela, but that for years he has been having an affair with her other sister Prue. On another level, George's invasion of Canada by creating 'Acres of treelessness' (p. 211) through his ironically 'shady deals' (p. 214) happened before, when her own great-grandfather, the '"robber king"' with whom she directly compares George (p. 218), 'made a bundle on the railways' (p. 200).

George, like Victor, is another highly visible, although European, immigrant. He 'has no desire to be startling' (p. 204), but 'is doomed to stand out' (p. 202). He is much more unambiguously predatory than Victor, however: he has 'glinting marauder's eyes' (p. 205) and a foxy smile, a vulpine smile, and long canines, and is compared with a snake and a dragon as well as a goat, a lizard, a puppy and a fish (pp. 198, 201, 209, 212). Like Victor, he experienced a very different second world war from that of the established settlers, but all his privations seem aggressive: shooting informers (p. 203), snaring small animals (p. 208), and taking a pin-up apart with a rusty knifeblade (p. 198). These activities he keeps a secret, but just as he capitalises on the 'family wars' (p. 213), so he cashes in on his immigrant status:

> These people were lax and trusting; and easily embarrassed by a hint of their own intolerance or lack of hospitality to strangers. They weren't ready for him. He'd been as happy as a missionary among the Hawaiians. A hint of opposition and he'd thicken his accent and refer darkly to Communist atrocities. Seize the moral high ground, then grab what you can get. (p. 207)

For the son of the family, with the archaically chivalrous name of Roland, the moral high ground is represented by the anachronistic *Wilderness Tips*, which shares the bookcase with the book after which the family hunting lodge was named. Roland, who thinks that hunting is unsafe now ('there are too many other men doing it – Italians and who knows what')

(p. 211) bitterly regrets the fact that Indians now wear ordinary clothes, 'the same as everybody else' (p. 214). His notion of himself as a 'bean counter' (p. 214) suggests *Walden*[25] (for which *Wilderness Tips* would be an excellent alternative title), but, unlike Murray, he plays at pioneering only at weekends. In both 'Oranges and Apples' and 'Wilderness Tips' the successful businessman great-grandfather implies that the strong, transient grip of English Canadians on the land has weakened; George in 'Wilderness Tips' perceives the family hunting lodge as 'a little slice of the past, an alien past' (p. 203), but in both stories we see a cherishing of a past that has never existed.

'Oranges and Apples' and 'Wilderness Tips' have something in common, but Atwood's story, like her male immigrant, is far less open to question than Munro's. Her reader is given less opportunity, to use Lee Maracle's phrase, to play the trickster. There is no doubt about George's sexual or financial successes, or his comfortable future as a Scotch-drinking *Financial Post* – reading Canadian – or of the very considerable disgust he arouses in the reader. Atwood uses her male immigrant to alienate her reader's (presumed) liberal sympathies. Munro cheats our expectations at every turn, and is perhaps mocking a desire for political correctness with Barbara's closing diagnosis, '"Oh, that's for the teacher.... That's a lie."'

NOTES

1. Peter Benesh (Toronto), 'Farewell to a White Canada', *Observer*, 19 March 1989, p. 28.
2. Bruce Proudfoot, 'The Setting of Immigration Levels in Canada Since the Immigration Act, 1976', *British Journal of Canadian Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1989, p. 253.
3. Dionne Brand, *Sans Souci and Other Stories* (first published 1988; Ithaca, New York: Firebrand Books, 1989), p. 27.
4. Sky Lee, *Disappearing Moon Cafe* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1991), p. 180.
5. Bharati Mukherjee, 'Introduction' to *Darkness* (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 2.
6. Chen Zhongming, Wang Xiao'ou, and Chang Yuemin, 'The Melting Pot and the Mosaic: A Comparison of Americans and Canadians', Jianguang Wang (ed.), *Westerners Through Chinese Eyes* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1990), p. 108.
7. Linda Hutcheon, *Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies* (Toronto, Oxford, and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
8. Bernice Schrank, 'Popular Culture and Political Consciousness in Mavis Gallant's *My Heart Is Broken*', *Essays on Canadian Writing* (Mavis Gallant issue), No. 42, Winter 1990, p. 70.
9. Mavis Gallant, 'Its Image on the Mirror', *My Heart Is Broken* (Toronto: New Press Canadian Classics, 1964), p. 138.
10. Benesh, 'Farewell to a White Canada', p. 28.
11. Lee Maracle, 'Oka Peace Camp – September 9, 1990', *Bobbi Lee, Indian Rebel* (first published 1975; Toronto: Womens Press, 1990), pp. 9-10.
12. Lee Maracle, 'Preface: You Become the Trickster', *Sojourner's Truth & Other Stories* (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1990), p. 11.

13. Claire Harris, 'A Matter of Fact', Second Story Collective (ed.), *Imagining Women* (Toronto: Womens Press, 1988), p. 103.
14. Hallvard Dahlie, 'The Fiction of Alice Munro', *Ploughshares* 4, No. 3, Summer 1978, p. 57, quoted in Beverly J. Rasporich, *Dance of the Sexes: Art and Gender in the Fiction of Alice Munro* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1990), p. 39.
15. Rosalie Osmond, 'Arrangements, "Disarrangements" and "Earnest Deceptions"', Coral Ann Howells and Lynette Hunter (eds.), *Narrative Strategies in Canadian Literature: Feminism and Postcolonialism* (Milton Keynes and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1991).
16. Coral Ann Howells, *Private and Fictional Words: Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970s and 1980s* (London and New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 1. She is quoting from Alice Munro, 'Simon's Luck', *The Beggar Maid, Stories of Flo and Rose* (London: Penguin, 1980), p. 177.
17. Alice Munro, 'Dance of the Happy Shades', *Dance of the Happy Shades* (first published 1968; London: Penguin, 1983), p. 224.
18. Alice Munro, 'Princess Ida', *Lives of Girls and Women* (first published 1971; London: Penguin, 1982), p. 67.
19. Alice Munro, 'Something I've Been Meaning To Tell you', *Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You* (first published 1974; London: Penguin, 1985), p. 14.
20. Alice Munro, 'Oranges and Apples', *Friend of My Youth* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1990), p. 108.
21. Lee Maracle, *Sojourner's Truth*, p. 13.
22. Quoted at the front of the Penguin edition of *Dance of the Happy Shades*.
23. The rift in the boulder suggests both the possible cancer in Barbara's body and the rift in their marriage. The boulder's description as 'far older than the shore on which it sat' (p. 134) recalls Walter Pater's description of the Mona Lisa, and thus the stately and secretive Barbara herself.
24. Margaret Atwood, 'Wilderness Tips', *Wilderness Tips* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), p. 221.
25. Whereas George, who would have no time for *Walden*, "'didn't have a bean when I married him"', as Portia points out (p. 219).